

POLITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

While Sully and Richelieu are almost lost behind a barrage of secretaries, Cardinal de Retz wrote every line with his own hand. France is the classic land of memoirs, and no French political apologia has been so widely read as that of the brilliant and cynical adventurer Paul de Gondi. When he was an extinct volcano, his imprisonments and exile only a bitter memory, he employed his unwelcome leisure in etching the period of confusion between the death of Richelieu and the majority of Louis XIV. First published in 1717, the book won instantaneous success and passed through twenty editions before the *Oeuvres du Cardinal de Retz* in the magnificent series *Les Grands Écrivains de la France* began to appear in 1870*. His scintillating narrative of the Fronde coloured historical writings till the middle of the nineteenth century, when Basan, the first critical historian of Louis XIII and Mazarin, roundly asserted that the celebrated Memoirs contained hardly any truth. That this sweeping verdict overshot the mark was pointed out by Sainte-Beuve. Like most other political autobiographers de Retz invents freely, omits or twists vital facts, exaggerates his rôle and blackens his enemies. He is a voluble witness pleading his case in court, not a judge seated on the bench. Yet it is precisely in such personal narratives, with the dust of conflict on the writer's hands, that we recapture the hectic atmosphere of the time. Here is a first-class story-teller, who knew all the celebrities of his time and paints them with their warts. His Memoirs, like those of St. Simon, are too long and in parts too detailed to be read through except by historical students, but they contain many a brilliant scene. We watch the chief actors on the stage from day to day and sometimes from hour to hour. One of the reasons of his enduring popularity is his aston-

ishing frankness. A defence of his political
 conduct is com-
 bined with a complacent revelation of his
 personal vices.
 "Madam," he begins, "I obey your command,
 in writing
 my life, at the expense of my reputation. I shall
 conceal
 nothing." The "only begetter" was almost
 certainly the
 immaculate Mme de S6vign6, the devoted
 friend of his
 dignified old age, who described him as "notre
 bon Cardinal."
 Forced into the Church, like Talleyrand, by
 ambitious rela-
 tives, he admits that he was "Peut-etre
 k moins
 eccl&astique du monde. Je ne pouvois passer
 de galknterie.
 Mes occupations eccl&astiques Itaient
 diversifies et 6gay6es
 par d'autres, qui 6toient un peu plus
 agr&bles." The reader